

FirstNet Making Progress, But Hasn't Fully Assessed Risks, Lessons Learned, GAO Says
HS Today By Anthony Kimery

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The First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) still hasn't "fully assessed its risks or established standards of conduct," or fully assessed risks which "could help FirstNet achieve its objectives and maximize use of its resources," [concluded the 72-page Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) audit of FirstNet](#).

In addition, the nationwide public-safety broadband network also "faces difficult decisions determining how to fund the network's construction and ongoing operations. These estimates indicate the cost to construct and operate such a network could be from \$12 to \$47 billion over the first 10 years," GAO said.

"Given that FirstNet faces numerous risks to achieve its complex objectives," GAO said FirstNet needs to develop standards of conduct to address any performance issues in a timely manner.

Overall, GAO said FirstNet is making steady progress.

"FirstNet is pleased with the GAO findings that we have made progress in establishing an organizational structure, planning the network and consulting with stakeholders," a FirstNet spokesperson told *Homeland Security Today*. "These findings represent the hard work and commitment of the FirstNet team. We also agree with the GAO's recommendations for improvement in certain areas and will fully implement them. As a new organization, FirstNet plans to continue to focus on implementing best practices to supplement the strong progress made to date."

Established by the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012, FirstNet also "lacks certain elements of effective internal controls" but is charged with the complex and challenging task of establishing a new, nationwide, wireless broadband network for public safety entities in consultation with federal, state, local and tribal stakeholders.

FirstNet is supposed to initially support interoperable data communications, and later integrate mission-critical voice capabilities as public safety standards for voice communications are developed.

The reason for FirstNet is because during emergencies, public safety officials rely on thousands of separate communications systems which often lack interoperability or the ability to communicate across agencies and jurisdictions. FirstNet was established within the Department of Commerce to establish, for public safety use, a nationwide, interoperable wireless broadband network, which will initially support data transmissions.

The law that created the FirstNet program established numerous responsibilities for FirstNet and provided the initial \$7 billion for network construction. After that, FirstNet is required to be self-funding. As part of the effort, FirstNet is working with five “early builder projects” that are building local and regional public-safety broadband networks.

GAO’s audit found “FirstNet has made progress establishing an organizational structure, planning for the network and consulting with stakeholders, and has begun establishing policies and practices consistent with federal internal control standards, but has not “assessed its risks or established standards of conduct—which is an important form of ethical guidance for its personnel.”

“Given that FirstNet faces numerous risks to achieve its complex objectives, fully assessing risks could help FirstNet achieve its objectives and maximize use of its resources. Developing standards of conduct could also help FirstNet address any performance issues in a timely manner,” GAO concluded.

GAO also raised concerns about the eventual cost of FirstNet's network, which GAO said will be influenced by FirstNet's business model, especially the extent of commercial partnerships; use of existing infrastructure; efforts to ensure network reliability; and network coverage.

“For example,” GAO’s audit report stated, “the cost of the network may be higher if FirstNet does not utilize partnerships and some existing infrastructure. To become self-funding, FirstNet is authorized to generate revenue through user fees and commercial partnerships. However, FirstNet faces difficult decisions in determining how to best utilize these revenue sources. For

instance, widespread network coverage can attract more users and revenue, but is expensive to construct and maintain, especially in rural areas.”

FirstNet has taken steps to collect and evaluate information and lessons from the five “early builder projects” that are developing local and regional public-safety networks, GAO found, “but could do more to ensure that the lessons are properly evaluated. For example, FirstNet has asked the projects to report on the experiences of their networks' users and has assigned contractors to collect and log lessons. However, FirstNet does not have a plan that clearly articulates how it will evaluate those experiences and lessons.”

Continuing, GAO stated that although FirstNet told the federal comptroller “that it remains in close contact with early builder projects,” GAO said it “previously found that a well-developed evaluation plan for projects like these can help ensure that agencies obtain the information necessary to make effective program and policy decisions.”

And given that the early builder projects are doing on a local and regional level what FirstNet must eventually do nationally, “an evaluation plan can play a key role in FirstNet's strategic planning and program management, providing feedback on both program design and execution and ensuring FirstNet has not missed opportunities to incorporate lessons the projects have identified,” GAO stated.

Asked by Congress to audit FirstNet's progress in establishing the network, GAO recommended “FirstNet should complete its risk assessment, develop standards of conduct and develop an evaluation plan for early builder projects.”

FirstNet concurred with GAO's recommendations.

“Unsurprisingly, for a project this large and with so many different players, approaches to the challenge have varied considerably,” wrote Bill Compton, the wireless solutions account executive and FirstNet lead at LGS Innovations, [in an October, 2014 *Homeland Security Today* report](#) .

Continuing, Compton wrote that, “A June 2014 report by the National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) showed states are at widely differing stages of development. For example, almost a quarter of states have not gotten involved in active planning, while more than half the states are already collecting data they plan to use in their planning efforts.”

Compton wrote that “the \$7 billion dollar initiative has reached a critical juncture in its development with the formal in-person state consultation meetings beginning July 31. These meetings will involve and shape what the FirstNet network will look like within each state.”

“While there remain some issues to resolve, such as local control and hosted applications,” Compton pointed out that “there are several best practices state and local governments should consider when it comes to FirstNet.”

Compton said, “While FirstNet is largely unprecedented in scope, it won’t be the first government 4G LTE BC14 network built for federal personnel and state first responders. In 2011, The US Department of Agriculture, the County of Hawaii, the State of Hawaii, Alcatel-Lucent and LGS Innovations launched a LTE pilot in Hilo and Keaau designed to test the ability of federal, state and local governments to share spectrum while providing modern broadband capabilities. This pilot leveraged the same 700 MHz LTE band 14 spectrum currently set aside for FirstNet.”

Compton said, “The pilot’s success not only validated the concept and value of a dedicated public safety network, but it also highlighted several lessons states can apply when taking on one of the biggest infrastructure projects since the modern highway system.”

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